

Today we are confronted by some of the most difficult passages in the bible. Passages which were uncomfortable when they were scribed and passages which are equally uncomfortable now! For at their heart are the question of who is worthy, or who is included in our view of the world – and who has the power to decide. The Gospel passage from Mark recounts a short abrupt interaction between Jesus and a Gentile woman. For a man who last week's gospel challenged the pharisees for the way they dealt with purity laws, Jesus interaction with this woman sees rude at best, and abusive at worst. Many commentators give a wide range of critiques to explain this; from Jesus was making a point with the disciples- to Jesus learning about what his mission is. I don't find any of these helpful – I just think this passage is uncomfortable and at some level we just need to live with that.

During the week I was really taken back by a YouTube clip a friend from Australia posted. It had aired on an Australian comedy show and it was entitled – *why the left are losing!* It has received a lot of backlash, which is funny because that is what it is about. In the satirical and confronting rant the comedian - says a number of things about societies inability to deal with difference, the other, and what is uncomfortable. Within this I found three comments particularly poignant not just about the left, but about much of our culture at the moment:

Firstly in an era of social media many *find something new to be offended about every few seconds*¹.

Secondly for generations who have more access to information than any others before it we are *about as open to dialogue and self-reflection as Gordon Ramsay on a spree*¹.

And thirdly there is an inability to engage in debate about ideas because so often *criticism of an idea is seen as a criticism of the person*.

Since I saw this clip earlier in the week I have been alarmed at how true this has appeared in news, currently affairs and even social media I have seen. At one point I even experienced this in a meeting when it was clear that while we were supposed to be engaged in a dialogue about ideas, there appeared no room to challenge any ways forward without individuals taking personal offence.

When you hold this experience of not being able to question an idea in contrast with the boldness of the woman in the gospel story to not only challenge Jesus, but to change his mind, we are provided with a stark image of what potentially is going on in this gospel and what it might be saying about who has power and how it is being used to influence and bring about justice.

We make many assumptions about power and who has it – and often the balance of power is not as it would appear. We also know that power can be used for good and

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/media/video/2018/sep/04/we-are-useless-tonightly-on-why-leftwing-outrage-will-lead-us-to-an-alt-right-world>

evil. So often in our modern context having power is seen as a bad thing, but it is not the power itself which is a problem but the way that it is used – and our ability to acknowledge it. So often victims are accused of having power, when in fact their oppressors continue to use their power to manipulate perceptions and exert control over those who are in their grip. Sadly we do not always know the source of power that controls others – and we often don't know where the money funding power is drawn from either. One of the great challenges of the investigations of historical or even current abuse by institutions against individuals, is that often the power of the institutions, including the church is not transparent, and so the person or people with the power is not often confronted or addressed. It also means we do not make space to hear voices which may challenge this power.

Power, and the perception of the use of power, is one of the very issues which Jesus was trying to confront as he teaches about how the kingdom of God should be.

Having said this, the encounter we hear recorded from Mark Gospel today is unsettling, to say the least, in the way that Jesus uses his power.

Jesus has entered into an unclean and foreign territory and he is greeted by a Gentile woman. It is remarkable enough that word about Jesus had spread to this region that this woman would somehow know who Jesus is

The woman greets Jesus and her recognition is all the more remarkable because the disciples have been a bit slow in recognizing Jesus earlier on in his ministry. Yet, this woman comes to Jesus, begs his mercy, and asks his power over a demon that has possessed her daughter. Jesus' response is, perhaps, the most perplexing piece of this narrative. At first, Jesus says No – he seems to refuse to help her. But the woman is not going to be silenced or dismissed, she believes Jesus can heal her daughter. And so the woman challenges Jesus argument, *even a family's dog by claiming that even the dog enjoys crumbs from the table.*

Jesus praises her faith. The Woman, despite all that she had been through had faith, believed that her prayers would be answered, stood against the crowd and demanded help. She did not fear expressing a counter opinion. She also named the power, named when it was used well, and named the difference that shared power can have.

Jesus and the Woman present an uncomfortable picture, especially to a society that is not open to dialogue or criticism. But note also how this dialogue takes place – it is not self-righteous or aggressive. But it is reflective, forthright and informed. I wondered what it says to us about how we engage in debate, or even deal with situations where the balance of power seems to be weighted in one direction.

Our Gospel reading from Mark however does not end with this encounter – unlike the way it is told in Mathew. Rather in Mark it moves swiftly on to an encounter with another outcast and another person who has little power within the context.

From Tyre, Jesus heads off to the region of the Decapolis, also a gentile territory. Perhaps he is still seeking to escape notice and to rest a bit, or perhaps he has a new vision of his mission beyond the borders of his home territory after his learning from the Woman. In any case, once again escaping notice proves impossible. *“They brought to him a deaf man who also had an impediment in his speech, and they begged him to lay his hand on him”* (Mark 7:32).

Like the Syrophenician woman, this man too is an outsider. He is cut off from the world by his inability to hear and communicate with others. This time Jesus does not hesitate to respond to a desperate request, though he does take the man aside, away from the crowd. In a very earthy scene, Jesus puts his fingers in the man’s ears, spits, and touches the man’s tongue, and then says in Aramaic *“Be opened!”* Immediately, the narrator tells us, *“the man’s ears were opened, and his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly”* (Mark 7:35). Suddenly this man can hear and communicate with those around him. Not only is he physically healed, he is also restored to his community.²

For those of us who lived in a very privilege position, in a wealthy city, in a country that has a great deal of power on the world stage I suspect it is hard for us to understand how profound these two stories are. Maybe we have experience in our lives when we have not felt like we have had power which might allow us to have some empathy with their situation, but for both these people they have been allowed to enter the dialogue – they finally have a voice in a society where they are silenced and invisible.

The danger of a society like ours that does not allow dialogue or critique, which cannot separate ideas from a person, is that we do not allow for such dialogue to be opened, and as such we don’t allow balance of power to ever change. The danger of this also is that we don’t allow others to enter into the conversation – to share an alternative voice like the two who are healed in our Gospel.

What might God be saying to us as a community and as individuals about how we engage in dialogue; about how we hear the voices of those who have less power than us?

Like our Gospel reading, this may unsettle us – but as we heard – when Jesus was unsettled by the dialogue great healing took place. And maybe we too have to be open to that! Amen.

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3761